Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

LO 1 Explain current beliefs about how the first peoples settled North America, and discuss the ways in which they became differentiated from one another over time.

LO 2 Describe the African societies that existed at the time the first Africans were brought to the New World as slaves.

LO 3 Describe Europe’s experiences during the last centuries before Columbus made his first voyage to the New World in 1492.
People have been living on the landmass we now know as the United States for at least the past 12,000 years—long before civilizations emerged among the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, and Jesus Christ, whose estimated time of arrival, however incorrect, is the measure by which western European time came to be measured. As a political nation, however, the United States is less than 250 years old, encapsulating roughly just nine or ten generations. Although this book is mostly about that relatively recent political nation and the people who lived in it, this chapter deals with the three groups of people—Indians, West Africans, and Europeans—who came together in North America more than five hundred years ago, setting in motion the process by which America would become an independent nation. This chapter begins in the Ice Age and ends as Christopher Columbus sets foot in North America in 1492, becoming, perhaps, the first European to ever do so.

**LO 1 Native America**

**The Paleo-Indian Era: The First Settlers (15,000–10,000 years ago)**

**Arrival**

We will probably never know when the first people set foot on what we now call the United States. For a long time, archaeologists believed that the first people came not for fame, fortune, or freedom (as subsequent immigrants would), but simply because they were hungry. According to this theory, about 12,000 years ago, thousands of young adults and their families left their homes in Asia and crossed a narrow passage of iced-over land called Beringia, southwest of today’s Alaska. These people were supposedly following herds of wooly mammoths, intending to hunt the animals to feed and clothe their families. Many of these hunters followed the herds south along the western coast of present-day Canada and ended up in what is now the United States. Many of their latter-day ancestors continued southward and, after many generations, made it all the way to the southernmost tip of South America, to a place now called Tierra Del Fuego.

Recent evidence casts doubt on this theory. Carbon dating suggests that the first people on the continent were probably here much earlier than 12,000 years ago. This has prompted a reevaluation of the Beringia theory, with some scholars suggesting that the first settlers came on boats, either following whales across the Pacific from Asia, or coming from Europe, along Greenland, in search of fish, or following the Pacific Coast of today’s Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington state (see Map 1.1).
In 1996, two men watching hydroplane races in Kennewick, Washington, discovered what turned out to be a 9,000-year-old skeleton. The skeleton, dubbed Kennewick man, baffled scientists, mainly because a physical reconstruction of the skull revealed a man who looked “more like a middle aged European accountant than he did a Paleo-Indian hunter.” People with European features were not thought to
have been in North America for another 8,500 years, so Kennewick man presented the possibility that North American settlement happened in different waves, from a variety of locations, with older groups dying out, being replaced by yet newer immigrants. Another scientist then suggested that Kennewick man’s features resembled those of people living in specific parts of Asia rather than Europe, further complicating the initial origins of humankind in North America. Was he a man with a European face (and genetic origins), an Asian one, or did he resemble one of America’s indigenous Indians? Current DNA sampling technology cannot tell us, but a final report written by one of the principal scientists concludes that “methods developed in the near future could be successful in extracting suitable DNA for analysis.” Meanwhile, many of today’s Indian tribes resisted the supposed European or Asian appearance of Kennewick man because their beliefs maintain that they are the one, true indigenous group in North America. Regardless of the dispute, and regardless of when or from whence they came, their age suggests that calling North America the “New World” might be a misnomer. England, for instance, was not inhabitable until 12,500 BCE, suggesting that the “New World” may actually have a much longer human history than what we now think of as the “Old World.” Today we call these initial North American settlers the Paleo-Indians.

Although the initial origins and timing are in question, what is known for certain is that the greatest flow of people in this early period came between 20,000 and 10,000 BCE, and that sometime between 9500 and 8000 BCE, the ocean level rose due to what we would today call global warming. This covered over the Bering Strait that connected Asia to North America, effectively ending the first major wave of immigration. That path has remained submerged ever since.

Expansion and Development

As these migrants moved from region to region across North America, they adapted their lifestyle according to the climate and the land, as people do. The people of the Paleo-Indian era (15,000 to 10,000 years ago) thus lived a wide range of lifestyles, developing many languages and belief systems along the way. Some of the oldest made spears by flaking stones and then chose “kill sites” that large herds traversed. Others hunted herds of animals across great distances. Still others slowly began to cultivate complex systems of sustainable agriculture which allowed them to remain in a single area for years. Still others depended on fishing and the riches of the seas to provide a stable life for their families. Over time, the population of Native North America grew.

The Archaic Era: Forging an Agricultural Society (10,000–2,500 years ago)

Between 5,000 and 8,000 years ago, a monumental transition occurred in how people lived their lives. During the Archaic era, agriculture gradually...
became the primary source of sustenance for most of the people of Native North America. This trend was perhaps the most significant development in American prehistory, because settled agriculture permitted the establishment of a sedentary existence, without the need to pursue herd animals. Maize, a form of corn, was one key element of this existence. Maize is a highly nutritious cereal, containing more nutrients than wheat, rice, millet, and barley. Its development was a remarkable feat of genetic engineering; Indians in today’s southern Mexico some 6,000 years ago cultivated the crop through the careful selection of desirable seeds, ultimately producing corn.

Populations grew larger, not only because food supplies increased, but also because the size of groups was no longer limited by the arduous demands of hunting. Many tribes became semi-sedentary, settling in camps during the agricultural growing season and then breaking camp to follow the herds at other times of year. Others became increasingly urban in their development, building permanent cities, some of monumental proportions. This was the formative period of the first settled tribes in North America—the immediate ancestors of many of the Indian tribes with which we are most familiar today. The Mesoamerican civilization, founded and developed by the Olmec people, thrived in today’s Mexico and served as a precursor to the many maize-based societies that developed throughout North America. Another successful ancient civilization—the people of Norte Chico, in today’s Peru—flourished by cultivating cotton, which they used to weave nets and catch the plentiful fish off the Pacific Coast, which they then transported to high-altitude cities in the Andes, some 5,500 years ago. Although nature has reclaimed much of what they created, the developments and accomplishments of these early civilizations are testaments to the capacity of humankind to create and develop monumental societies. One historian has argued that the only way to fully grasp the earth-changing significance of these early civilizations is to take a helicopter ride over undeveloped parts of Mexico and Central and South America, realizing that many of the hills and creeks below are actually the buried remains of temples and canals built by those early civilizations.

The Pre-Columbian Era: Developing Civilizations (500 BCE–1492 CE)

Of all the people living in North America before contact with Europeans, we know the most about the people of the pre-Columbian era (500 BCE–1492 CE). The great civilizations of the pre-Columbian world (the phrase means “before Columbus”) usually based their economy on agriculture, thus enabling them to endure in a single location long enough to create complex, hierarchical societies and develop long-standing trading networks.

The largest Indian civilization in this period was that of the Incas, who lived on the western coast of South America, from the equator to the southern tip of Chile. The Incas built large cities and fortresses on the steep slopes of the Andes Mountains (and were the beneficiaries of fish deliveries from the people of Norte Chico). Other impressive pre-Columbian societies include the Maya, who, with their step-tiered temples, dominated southern Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula (in present-
The Anasazi

In the present-day United States, two of the largest pre-Columbian cultures were the Anasazi and the Mississippian. In the American Southwest, the Anasazi founded a vast civilization by combining hunting and gathering with sedentary agriculture in order to sustain a large population in the arid desert of present-day New Mexico. As a testament to the grandness of their civilization, between 900 and 1150 CE the Anasazi built fourteen “great houses” in the Chaco Canyon, each one several stories tall and containing more than two hundred rooms. They were perhaps used as large apartment buildings, as the canyon served as the major trading post for turquoise and other material goods. Several of these great houses still stand today, near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The Mississippian

A second large, pre-Columbian culture to develop on the land now known as the United States was that of the Mississippian, who lived at about the same time as the Anasazi, from 700 to 1500 CE, although their civilization peaked about 1100 CE. The largest Anasazi city was called Cahokia, located eight miles east of present-day St. Louis. Inhabited by more than twenty thousand people (comparable in size to London at that time), Cahokia served as the civilization’s crossroads for trade and religion. It was the land’s first metropolis. Webs of roads surrounded the city, connecting rural villagers for hundreds of miles in all directions. Many different tribes made up the Mississippian civilization. The Mississippian developed an accurate calendar and built a pyramid that, at the time, was the third largest structure of any kind in the Western Hemisphere. The Mississippian also left many earthen mounds dotting the landscape.

Some of these early civilizations, like the Anasazi, declined about two hundred years before first contact with Europeans and Africans. Others, such as the Aztecs and some of the Mississippian, were still thriving in 1492. Why did these powerful civilizations decline? There is no single answer to the question. Some scholars say that certain civilizations outgrew their capacity to produce food. Others say that battles with enemy tribes forced them to abandon the principal landmarks of their civilization. Still others cite major droughts.
North America in 1492

By the late 1400s, North America was home to numerous civilizations and tribes, some of which were sizeable, dominating large swaths of land. More than two hundred languages were spoken in North America, among hundreds of different tribes. It was as if each of today’s cities spoke its own language and had unique social rituals. Diversity abounded in this land. So did conflict.

Some Social Similarities of Native North Americans

Despite the wide variety of lifestyles developed by the pre-Columbian peoples, there are some broad general similarities among the tribes in North America during the late 1400s. Most of the tribes, for instance, were based on a clan system, in which a tribe was divided into a number of large family groups. They were also mostly matrilineal, meaning that children typically followed the clan of their mother and that a man, when married, moved into the clan of his wife. Matrilineal societies usually develop when agriculture is the primary food source for a society. In these societies women are in charge of farming (Europeans were universally surprised to see women working in the fields). Thus Indian women maintained the tribe’s social institutions while men were hunting, fishing, or off to war. This system was, however, by no means universal in Native North America, but it does signify a level of sexual equality absent from Europe at the time. Indeed, women were just as likely as men to wield political power in some of these societies. Many Algonkian tribes, for instance, had a female tribal leader.

Land was customarily held in common as well, although there are some instances in which individual rights are said to have existed and others where clan rights existed. Enslavement (usually of captured enemies) was relatively common as well, especially in the tribes of the American Southeast, but Indian enslavement varied in severity, and it is unlikely that enslavement was inherited, meaning that the children of slaves were usually not, by accident of birth, born as chattel.

Most Indian religions were polytheistic (believing in many deities) and animistic (believing that supernatural beings, or souls, inhabit all objects and govern their actions). Indian religions were usually closely related to the physical world, and local terrain was naturally imbued with spiritual meaning. Placing an emphasis on this world (and not on the next), typical ceremonies featured rain and fertility prayers. Many New England tribes, for example, believed in a ruling deity whom they called Manitou and looked to a dramatic local site (such as Mount Katahdin in Maine) as the source of divine power.

Regional Variations

These broad similarities aside, the tribes of Native America were rich in regional variety (Map 1.2). Most variations depended on how a tribe adapted to its surrounding terrain, and thus it is possible to make generalizations based on region.

The Northeast. Several sizeable societies lived in the north-east corner of the United States, in the area now called New England. These tribes included the Wampanoag, Narragansett, Massachusetts, Mohawk, Oneida, Erie, and Pequot. In general, these groups subsisted on hunting and agriculture, although most of their foodstuffs derived from agriculture. Those that lived along the coast relied on the riches of the ocean. Most of these tribes lived in small villages that were closely surrounded by forests that protected them from attack—something that was always a possibility in the congested northeastern region. Indeed, fear of attack was part of the reason why several of these northeastern tribes...
came together to create the Iroquois Confederacy, a political and trading entity that maintained relations between several tribes. (Iroquois is actually the European name for the Haudenosaunee Confederation.) The local forests provided the raw materials for wooden houses crafted by the tribes of the Haudenosaunee, who called them “longhouses.” Most of these tribes remained small, however, only occasionally trading with one another.

Other tribes developed cross-regional alliances. The tribes within the Haudenosaunee Confederacy developed an elaborate political system that incorporated villages into nations, then nations into a large confederation. The confederation’s leaders were charged with keeping peace among the tribes under its auspices in order to assure continuous trade and peaceful relations. The proximity of one’s tribal neighbors in the populous Northeast led many tribes to embrace the politics of the Haudenosaunee. Others, however, viewed the tribes of the Haudenosaunee as their bitter enemies.

The Mid-Atlantic. In the Mid-Atlantic region, where New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia are today, lived the Lenni Lenape (Delaware), Susquehannock, and Nanticock, among others. The people in these tribes lived on a mixture of agriculture, shellfish, and game. They lived a semi-sedentary life, occasionally leaving their stable villages to follow herds of roaming animals. They, too, remained mostly local, aware of, but rarely venturing into, the lands of another tribe. Disputes over boundaries routinely led to violence. The Indians who lived in the woodlands of the Northeast or Mid-Atlantic were collectively called “Woodlands Indians.”

The Southeast. The Southeast—today’s Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—was inhabited by the Cherokees (actually named the Tsalagi), Creek, Choctaw, Biloxi, Chicksaw, and Natchez, among others. This was one of the most heavily populated areas of Native America at time of first contact with the Europeans, a fact that would have profound consequences when the Europeans tried to settle there. These tribes subsisted on agriculture, though those living in Florida and the Gulf Coast relied on fishing.
as well. They developed strong traditions in ceramics and basket weaving; they traded over long distances; and some, such as the Natchez, developed stable, hierarchical political organizations.

**The prairies.** The prairies, which stretch from today’s Dakotas south to Oklahoma, were inhabited by the Omaha, Wichita, Kichai, and Sioux. These tribes usually lived on the edges of the plains, where they lived in semi-sedentary agricultural villages and held major hunting parties every year to hunt bison, which was the chief game animal of the Great Plains. These tribes produced no pottery or basketry, or even much agriculture, as they depended almost entirely on the bison and rivers for their subsistence.

**The High Plains.** The Indians of the High Plains, which extend from today’s Montana all the way south to northwestern Texas, included the Blackfeet, Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche. Like the Native Americans of the prairies, these tribes depended on bison for a large part of their subsistence (especially after contact with European settlers drove them further west), and their only agricultural crop was usually tobacco (again, after contact), which they used for religious purposes and for pleasure.

**The Southwest.** In the Southwest, in today’s New Mexico and Arizona (and where the Anasazi had lived), lived the Apache and Navajo tribes, along with a large conglomeration of tribes that included the Hopi, Taos, and Zunis to make up what the Europeans called “the Pueblo people.” These Indians subsisted almost entirely on agriculture, which is a testament to their ingenuity, considering the slight amount of rain that falls in this region. By about 1200 CE, several of these tribes had developed villages made up of several multistory buildings built on strategically defensive sites in canyons and river valleys. By the time Columbus had reached the West Indies, some of these tribes had developed canals, dams, and hillside terracing to control and channel the limited amount of rainwater. Ceramic pots, which were elaborate and sophisticated during this precontact period, were used to transport water as well. This was a society similar in some ways to Europe. According to one European observer in 1599, the Pueblo people “live very much the same as we do,” although it is possible he said that simply because the Pueblos were one of the few Indian societies to have men, not women, practice agriculture.

**The Northwest.** In the Northwest, in today’s Oregon and Washington, lived the Chinook, Tillamook, Yuki, and Squamish, to name just a few. These peoples ate fish and shellfish in addition to fruits, nuts, and berries. They made plank houses of cedar, which they sometimes surrounded with carved totem poles. They were accomplished artists, placing a priority on the arts of carving and painting. These tribes developed the elaborate ornamentation we commonly see on totem poles. Other prized creations were their artistically designed masks. Many of these tribes celebrated annual holidays, maintained social welfare programs, and adhered to a well-developed view of the cosmos.
CHAPTER 1

Three Societies on the Verge of Contact

Intertribal Harmony and Hostility

Most tribal villages coexisted with their neighbors in a fairly stable balance between peace and warfare, at least until territorial disputes, competition for resources, or traditional rivalries set off battle, which happened often. Indians also went to war to bolster their numbers; male captives taken in war were usually integrated into the victorious tribe’s village as slaves; females and children were commonly integrated as full members. Some societies, such as the Maya and Aztec, developed an entire culture around warfare. The fact that some Indian groups forged defense alliances, such as the Iroquois Confederacy, demonstrates that protective measures were necessary in a sometimes violent Native America.

But the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy demonstrates something else as well: it shows Indians’ interest in and ability to promote peaceful and productive interactions. In many parts of the land, neighboring tribes traded fruitfully with each other. A network of dirt and stone roads traversed the continent. Towns became centers for trade and commerce. Although such trade was small in scale by European standards, the goods exchanged were vital to each village’s way of life. These goods included arrowheads, furs, wampum (beads made of polished shell), roanoke (bracelet-like bands made of wampum), and food. Trade networks could extend over hundreds of miles; for instance, copper goods from the Southwest have been found at Eastern Woodlands sites.

Economics

This trade made up a part of Indian economic life. Tribes traded foodstuffs like corn and meat, sometimes traveling expansive trading routes; they also traded ornamental items such as jewelry and hunting weapons. Their trading grounds provided an early example of what would come to be called the “middle ground” between the native cultures and European traders, after the Europeans had established settlements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Despite their willingness to barter in portable goods, a sizeable majority of the people of Native America did not believe that property could be privately owned. Bequeathed to all, land could be used by anyone so long as they cultivated it properly. In practice, however, tribal leaders granted specific parcels of land to a family for a season or two, and tribes frequently fought bloody battles for control of certain plots of land. When large numbers of Europeans arrived in the 1600s, the tribes of Native America would be forced to reconsider their conception of private property.

LO2 Africa

Of all the immigrants who came to North America between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, roughly 250,000 of them came from Africa, as slaves. This was not a huge percentage of all immigrants but nevertheless a significant one, dramatically influencing labor, social, and cultural relations in the New World. Understanding Africa’s social customs is thus critical to understanding the development of the American nation. A large majority of the transplanted Africans were from West Africa (Map 1.3), and most of the West Africans were from a place called Lower Guinea.

Politics

Africa, the second largest continent on earth (after Asia), is as varied in climate and geography as North America. It follows, then, that there was great range in the way Africans lived their lives. By the time of the first sustained contact with Europeans, in the 1400s and 1500s, some African societies had developed vast civilizations, as trade routes wound through the continent’s various regions. Africans had also witnessed the spread of a modern religion, Islam, which, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was probably the most powerful and vibrant religion in the world, expanding rapidly throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Spain. One part of the continent that was transformed by the rise of Islam was West Africa.
Map 1.3
Africa in the Fifteenth Century

View an interactive version of this map.
Ghana
West African kingdom that prospered from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries; famous for its gold deposits

Mali
Flourishing Islamic kingdom; it enveloped the kingdom of Ghana by the thirteenth century

Timbuktu
Principal city of the kingdom of Mali; cultural capital of Africa in the thirteenth century

Lower Guinea
Southernmost part of Mali; home to the majority of the Africans who came to America

Songhay Empire
Portion of Mali after that kingdom collapsed around 1200; this empire controlled Timbuktu

Benin
African empire on the Malian coast

Kongo
African empire on the Malian coast

Ghana
The kingdom of Ghana ruled West Africa from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, beginning a tradition of expansive trade throughout Western Africa using horses, camels, and advanced iron weapons to transport goods and ideas. A kingdom as rich in arts and commerce as any in Europe at the time, Ghana was made up of several large cities, where the people produced elaborate works of art and maintained a stable and complex political structure. Ghana was especially famous for its gold. But the kingdom’s extensive trade routes caused its eventual demise. In the twelfth century, it lost its trade monopoly, and gold was discovered elsewhere in West Africa. In addition, during the first half of the thirteenth century, North African Muslims used Ghanaian trade routes to invade the kingdom, and by 1235 CE had conquered the ruling parties of Ghana.

Mali. Mali, a flourishing Islamic kingdom, rose in power as Ghana declined. Its principal city, Timbuktu, became Africa’s cultural and artistic capital, drawing students from as far away as southern Europe. Timbuktu’s cultural wealth was demonstrated in its rich artistic and economic resources. By the thirteenth century, Mali had enveloped the Ghanaian kingdom and expanded mightily. However, Islam did not permeate all of Mali’s territories. In contrast to what was happening in northern Africa, Islam spread slowly in the southernmost part of Mali. This southernmost part, called Lower Guinea, was the home of the majority of the Africans who came to America. This meant that many of the Africans who were forced to come to North America via the slave trade maintained their tribal religions rather than Islam. Thus, Islam was not present in North America at this time.

Songhay, Benin, and Kongo. The kingdom of Mali collapsed around 1500—just as sustained contact with Europeans was beginning. Mali was divided, with the largest portion replaced by the Songhay Empire, which took control of Timbuktu. Farther along the Malian coast, the empires of Benin and Kongo maintained control, meaning that they, too, would be approached by European traders in search of goods and, eventually, slaves. By 1500, the ruler of the Kongo people converted to Catholicism, having been impressed by the Portuguese traders he had encountered.

Society
If political control over the region remained in flux in western Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, social customs were slightly more stable. Most of the Africans in Lower Guinea lived in kinship groups and, through them, in villages, which were part of larger kingdoms and woven together by a web of roads. The Africans of Lower Guinea were mostly farmers, living in settled agricultural areas. The success of their agriculture allowed some in their society to become artists, teachers, tradesmen, and storytellers—professions that earned their society’s respect. Above this group of professionals were nobles and priests, who were mostly older men. Below them were farmers and slaves.

As with many North American tribes, family descent in Lower Guinea was typically matrilineal. Gender roles were generally complementary in Lower Guinea, as women frequently worked as local traders, participated in local politics, and played leading roles in the agricultural society. And, as with the agricultural societies of North America, the presence of stable agriculture meant the development of gendered roles. These cultural systems would all be challenged by sustained contact with Europeans and European-based societies.

The Africans of Lower Guinea also possessed slaves—usually captives from wars or debtors who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debt. Unlike the type of slavery that developed in the New World, the African system of slavery did not enslave captives for life, nor did it necessarily deny them access to education. Significantly, the children of slaves

Ghana was especially famous for its gold.
were not routinely predestined to become slaves themselves; it also was not based on a system of racial classification, as would develop in the United States.

Religion and Thought
Religiously, most of the Africans in Lower Guinea did not embrace Islam; they still believed in their traditional African religions. These religions were as varied as those of Native America, but generally they consisted of belief in a single supreme ruler and several lesser gods. Many of these lesser gods served in worldly capacities—to bring rain and to ensure good harvests, for example. They honored these gods elaborately, through their art and their celebrations. There was no single transcendent spirit mediating between this world and the next (such as Christ), but deceased ancestors served as personal mediators between a person and the gods. This, in turn, nourished a strong tradition of family loyalty.

Africa on the Eve of Contact
On the eve of European contact, then, West Africa was, in general, an agricultural society divided into villages organized along matrilineal kinship lines. Some of its people were extremely skilled in the arts, and there was a class of intellectuals who were positioned in houses of learning and supported by kings. Politics advanced in large kingdoms that oversaw and protected their citizens and that allowed for expansive lines of trade. On the whole, West Africans participated in sophisticated societies that had highly developed skills for coping with the diverse geographical settings where they lived.

LO3 Europe
While Africans constituted one large block of immigrants between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the large majority of newcomers to North America came from Europe. These settlers came with a variety of goals and ambitions. Many, but not all, were disappointed in what they found.

Europe up to 1492
Europeans were the initiators of the clash of cultures that would take place in the New World. But until the twelfth century, most of Europe was an economic and intellectual backwater in comparison to China, the countries of Northern Africa, and parts of the Middle East. Intellectual and religious life thrived in Christian Byzantium (encompassing today’s Turkey), and the burgeoning Islamic world was spreading episodically through the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain.

A significant factor in Europe’s withdrawal from world affairs was feudal lords’ domination of large plots of European land called manors (see Map 1.4). These men presided over a system of labor that came to be called feudalism, in which a lord granted control over a piece of land to an upper-class ally, or vassal. The vassal’s grant included authority over all the land’s inhabitants. The vassal treated these laborers as servants, guaranteeing them a level of protection in return for a portion
Medieval Europe was therefore split into myriad feudal territories, which divided it linguistically and economically. It also suffered from political instability due to Muslim expansion and Viking raids. Trade and learning virtually disappeared as a result of the battles among feudal lords and between feudal lords and various invaders. The Catholic Church was the sole overarching institution, and during parts of the medieval period, the Church was at its most powerful. As long as Europe was comprised of hundreds of these feudal fiefdoms and under threat from raiders abroad, there were no entities that could operate as strong nations would: by organizing and controlling various methods of production and trade. The decline of feudalism would propel Europe from its secondary status in world affairs to a dynamic force embarking on far-flung overseas adventures.

The Decline of Feudalism

By the fifteenth century, the feudal system was rapidly declining in Western Europe. In its stead, nations were becoming more powerful. There were four causes for this transition: an economic impetus, a religious one, a biological one, and a political one (see “The reasons why...” on the next page). Together, these changes would lead to the rise of nations, which would compete with one another. These nations would look outward and expand from Europe sparking an Age of Discovery, which would lead to sustained contact with the “New World.”

Society

Socially, most Europeans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries still lived in an agrarian society, on of the fruits of their labor. In reality, these servants, called serfs, forfeited nearly all of their freedoms to the lord and vassal. With the exception of the Catholic Church, the nobleman was the sole authority on the land, serving as governor, judge, and war leader. The lords’ overwhelming authority meant that serfs were not free and could not act autonomously. They could not change their profession or even move without approval from their lord.

remnants of the feudal system, although towns and even some great cities had developed since the eleventh century. To ensure a regular food supply, all the members of European villages usually shared their year’s crops. As with any society based on agriculture, there were gendered roles in European society. Unlike some African and Indian cultures, women rarely participated in a town’s political life or tilled the fields (but they did have lighter duties in the fields, as did children). For the most part, most women’s power was limited to their influence on their husbands, children, and servants. In contrast, some women in religious orders (Catholic nuns) operated abbeys and wielded significant power in that realm.

Perhaps the greatest change during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries was the expansion of European cities, where intellectual life prospered and which demanded surplus agriculture, which could be supplied only when rural farmers expanded their production to bring food to the market. This development further challenged feudal society because it gave serfs the ability to earn money at the market, which allowed them to purchase their freedom from the declining feudal lords.

The Renaissance

By the late fourteenth century, the forces of economic expansion and the development of urban life allowed for a high level of material well-being in the great European cities and the general decline of closed-off feudal living. It was this wealth and expansive mindset that engendered the Renaissance, an intellectual and artistic reconnection to the age of Greco-Roman antiquity, when humankind was considered to be more cosmopolitan and not merely a source of labor for feudal fiefdoms. Central to Renaissance artists and thinkers was the idea of humanism, which lionized the individual and therefore directly challenged the declining feudal system.

The Decline of Catholic Europe

If the system of feudalism was declining in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Catholicism was still the undisputed religious force in Western Europe. Indeed, the artists of the Renaissance usually used Christian images in order to celebrate the new, more open atmosphere. The Church exerted its greatest power amid the divided feudal society. As the sole institution with moral authority and even political power over all of Europe, the later medieval years witnessed Catholicism’s greatest thinker,
Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and its most powerful popes, Innocent III (pope from 1198–1216) and Boniface VIII (pope from 1294–1303). Catholicism covered Europe like a cloak, unifying many disparate feudal lands.

**Change**

By the first quarter of the sixteenth century, two impulses collided to challenge the authority of the Catholic Church. The first occurred in this world: a new attitude toward humankind brought about by the slow urbanization of Europe, the consolidation of monarchical powers, and the rise of popular piety. On the other hand, the Catholic Church responded to the mercantilists’ demands for organization and protection. The kings did this with considerable popular support; few feudal lords responded to the mercantilists’ demands for organization and protection.

There were four causes for the decline of feudalism:

**Expanding trade.** The first inklings of the transition away from feudalism can be seen around 1000 CE, when Italian coastal traders began to exploit long-distance trade routes. The riches earned at these trading posts gave several city-states the wealth and power to free themselves from feudal lords. Similarly, merchants began to develop a theory of mercantilism (although it would not get that name until Adam Smith coined it, in the late 1700s), which suggested that a nation or state’s prosperity was determined by the total volume of its trade. This was based on the idea that the amount of trade in the world was fixed at a certain level; those who traded favorably simply had a larger piece of the pie. This economic theory gained credence as nations increased in power throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and as European powers competed to develop colonial empires. It would propel these nations overseas and across continents in search of cheaper or more valuable raw materials.

**The Black Death.** The Black Death, or bubonic plague, which started to spread in 1346 and eventually killed one-third of all Europeans, advanced the decline of the feudal system. It did so in two principal ways. First, it caused the death of one-third of all Europeans, and it did not discriminate by class, meaning that feudal lords died at the same rate as did the poorer members of the continent. Second, the death of so many farmers meant that those who survived became more valuable; this forced feudal lords to grant them more allowances, including greater personal freedom, in order to maintain their loyalty.

**The Hundred Years’ War.** The fourth reason for the decline of feudalism was rooted in politics. The Hundred Years’ War, waged between France and England in the fourteenth century, was, at its core, a battle over who controlled the French throne, but it is significant for two reasons. First, it provided Italian and Iberian merchants with the opportunity to find water routes that connected southern and northern Europe, as they could no longer safely travel by land through France. This spurred several technological advances that would make possible the exploration of North America. Second, the war allowed the kings to further consolidate their power at the expense of the feudal lords, leading to the rise of several large kingdoms. By the fifteenth century, kings who had long been subjected to the whims of the feudal lords and who did not possess the financial or military power to become absolute rulers began to assert themselves and respond to the mercantilists’ demands for organization and protection. The kings did this with considerable popular support; few feudal lords had endeared themselves to their subjects. By the end of the fifteenth century, three strong dynasties had emerged: the Tudors in England, the Valois in France, and the Habsburgs in Spain. As the power of feudal landlords diminished and that of the kings increased, one idea gained currency: that a person could belong to or identify with a unified nation. This, in some ways, was when the idea of nationalism was born.
the one hand, merchants did not like priests moralizing about their profits; rulers did not like their authority challenged. On the other hand, the Church’s total incapacity to confront and respond to the crises of the fourteenth century, which included famine, plague, and the Hundred Years’ War, prompted several movements of popular piety. Together, these challenges led to the development of Christian humanism, defined as a renewed belief in the importance of the singular individual, as opposed to the institution of the Church. Optimism, curiosity, and emphasis on naturalism were components of the humanistic worldview. These factors led to renewed interest in the sciences, which began to challenge Christianity as a worldly authority.

The second event concerned humans’ relationship with God, and the Church itself helped invite this second challenge. Beginning during the Crusades of the eleventh century, the Church had grown increasingly secular in its discipline; it had even begun to sell its favors. For instance, some popes used their authority to limit the amount of time a person’s soul spent in purgatory; the cost of this divine favor was usually cash. This practice, which grew throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was called the selling of indulgences.

### The Reformation

These dual challenges sparked the Protestant Reformation. At its core, the Reformation was a movement that challenged the Catholic Church to return to its unornamented origins. In addition to questioning the selling of indulgences, the leaders of the Reformation were critical of Church rituals, including the Mass, confession rites, and pilgrimages to holy sites. Together, these challenges led to the development of Christian humanism, defined as a renewed belief in the importance of the singular individual, as opposed to the institution of the Church. Optimism, curiosity, and emphasis on naturalism were components of the humanistic worldview. These factors led to renewed interest in the sciences, which began to challenge Christianity as a worldly authority.

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The leaders of the Reformation, 

> Martin Luther took advantage of the invention of the printing press to advocate that scripture be read in local vernacular languages like German and English rather than Latin.
had been divided by internal religious wars for several decades, as Catholics and Protestants brutally vied for control of the country. It would become a powerful force only later, after Queen Elizabeth muted religious conflict, stabilized the economy, and prepared the country to challenge Spain as the most powerful nation in Europe. All that would take place after 1492.

And in the end . . .

At the end of the fifteenth century, three societies, long separated from one another and uniquely developed, stood on the verge of sustained contact. The location of this contact would be the “New World,” which included Native North America, as well as Central and South America. Europeans would be the principal catalysts, as their world was in the middle of dramatic changes that led to outward expansion. But the peoples of West Africa and Native America would struggle to shape the outcome of sustained intercultural contact. The battle, both physical and ideological, would begin in earnest in 1492.